



VIEWS

QUARTERLY NEWS FROM THE MIDPENINSULA REGIONAL OPEN SPACE DISTRICT • FALL 2021



Photo Contest Winner, People in Nature Category: Sisters finding some respite from the pandemic during a tranquil sunset at Russian Ridge Preserve. (Larry Chow)

Taking the Long View

How A Recent Land Purchase Highlights Midpen's 50-Year Commitment to Community Conservation Goals

Since the 1970s, Midpen has worked for the public to preserve open space lands in the greater Santa Cruz Mountains region. This is why, when you look up to the foothills and beyond to the ridgelines, you see golden grasslands and shaded oak woodlands, exposed rock dotted with coyote brush and manzanita, verdant corridors marking the paths of creeks and many other scenic landscapes.

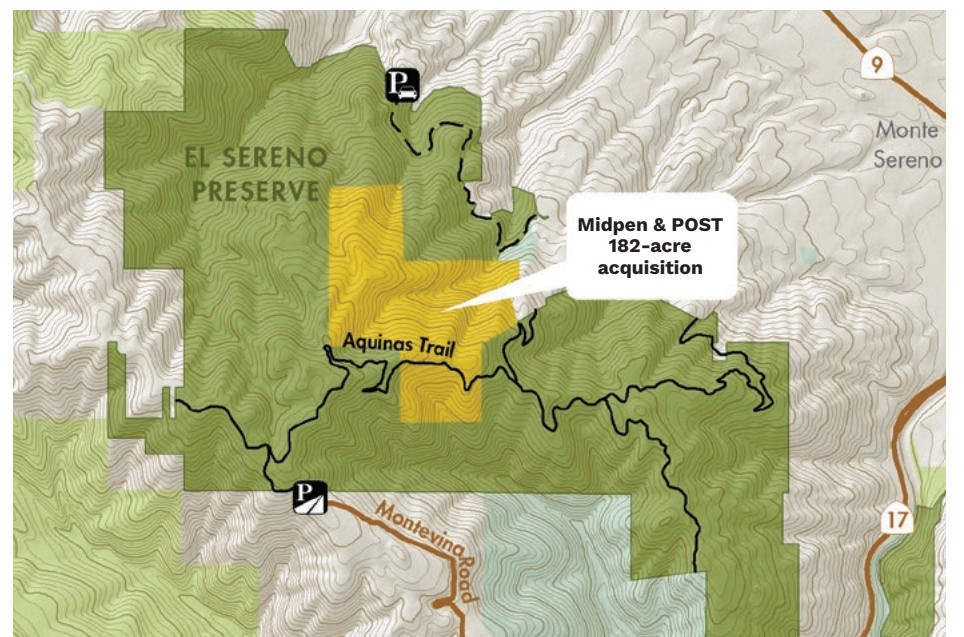
These natural resources are not only beautiful, but necessary for a healthy environment, providing habitats for native wildlife and supporting clean air and water. They are also serene places that you can visit and enjoy. To date, Midpen has protected 65,153 acres in San Mateo, Santa Clara and Santa Cruz counties through a combination of purchases, easements, leases and other tools.

The mountains may seem wide-open and wild from the valley, however they have been fragmented and defined by centuries of human intervention. Private ownership has carved up the landscape into a complex puzzle of small and large properties;

and roadways, highways, and human development have further fragmented habitats and affected our natural ecosystems. These factors often complicate Midpen's mission-driven work to preserve, restore, and protect our natural environment. It can take years, even decades, for Midpen to connect public open space lands and manage them in a way that begins to restore their biodiversity and resiliency.

In 2020, Midpen and our nonprofit partner Peninsula Open Space Trust purchased the San Jose Water Company inholding property, officially expanding El Sereno Preserve to 1,614 acres and forever linking together the full 3.65 miles of the Aquinas Trail.

El Sereno Open Space Preserve, near Los Gatos, Monte Sereno and Saratoga, is one example of the patience and tenacity required to fulfill the community's goal of preserving a regional greenbelt. Midpen purchased

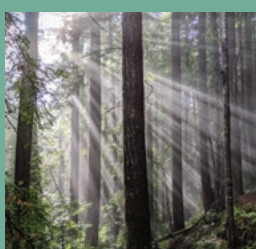


the first property that would become the preserve in 1975. As El Sereno grew over the years, it began to encircle what was a 182-acre private inholding parcel owned by the San Jose Water Company. Critically, this property created a 0.35-mile gap in the Aquinas Trail that left the full trail alignment at risk of being bifurcated by the underlying private property owner.

This is likely not the last time you will hear about this trail this year — it is planned to support regional trail connectivity as an additional key segment of the Bay Area Ridge Trail.

This 45-year history of El Sereno highlights Midpen's strengths: our stability and longevity as a public agency. To realize long-term community conservation and open space goals, voters like you created Midpen by passing Measure R in November 1972. We call this the long view, and it remains a testament to what our community can accomplish when working together. We invite you to learn more as we celebrate our collective accomplishments in 2022, the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District.

INSIDE THIS ISSUE



Forest Health

Midpen is exploring a restoration forestry project in La Honda Creek Open Space Preserve. Find out what we're learning.

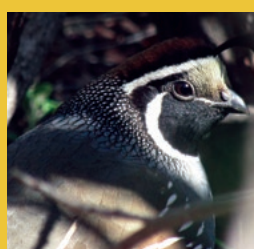


Photo Contest Winners Announced

See the winning images from our annual photography contest, selected from more than 200 entries.



Wildland Fire Resiliency

This fall, multiple projects associated with Midpen's new Wildland Fire Resiliency Program begin.



Local schoolchildren engage in hands-on environmental education with support from a Midpen grant. (Groundswell Ecology)

Growing the Next Generation

Midpen Grant Supports Hands-On Outdoor Science Education

Santa Cruz-based nonprofit Groundswell Coastal Ecology is creating a new generation of land stewards by engaging Pescadero youth in building coastal resilience. Groundswell’s work complements Midpen’s conservation efforts on the Coastside by educating youth about the importance of protecting local open space lands.

Using a \$49,025 grant from Midpen, with additional support from the San Mateo Office of Sustainability,

Groundswell built a native plant nursery on the Pescadero Middle and High School grounds.

“The new community nursery is an important resource where students and the community can participate in the hands-on process of making our coastlines better for people and nature,” Groundswell Coastal Ecology Director Dr. Bill Henry said. “Encouraging community participation is fundamental to creating lasting positive change.”

Through hands-on learning experiences and scientific data collection, approximately 90 students from Pescadero Middle and High School are introduced to coastal ecosystems, the challenges facing coastal habitats, and the information land managers need to make informed stewardship decisions.

With guidance from an advisory team of land managers and restoration professionals, the students use the theory of design thinking to propose solutions and design a project related to either engineering green infrastructure, creating social resilience, or financing restoration projects. The top designs are presented to the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors and the California Coastal Commission.

Learn more about the Grantmaking Program at openspace.org/grants.

Midpen Surpasses Interim Goal for Curbing Carbon Emissions

Our most recent greenhouse gas inventory shows Midpen is making great progress toward our greenhouse gas emission reduction goals.

Midpen’s Climate Action Plan, finalized in 2018, outlines efforts for meeting our goals to reduce operational emissions 20% by 2022, 40% by 2030, and 80% by 2050, as compared to our 2016 emissions. To track progress and maintain transparency about what actions we are taking to combat carbon emissions, every two years staff conduct a greenhouse gas inventory.

Our latest inventory shows that emissions in 2020 were 24% below the baseline, surpassing our goal of 20% reductions by 2022. The inventory measures emissions from vehicles, equipment and business travel (26% reduction), employee commutes (38% reduction), facilities (35% reduction) and tenant residences (31% reduction).

These reductions were achieved by replacing patrol vehicles with renewable diesel or more fuel efficient models, increasing the use of electric motorcycles for patrol and electric power equipment for resource management work, and reducing employee commutes.

Follow our ongoing work to reduce greenhouse gas emissions at openspace.org/climate.



Midpen ranger and maintenance staff use electric power tools when possible. (Jack Owicki)

Outdoor Activities Fall 2021

September • October • November openspace.org/activities

Docent naturalist-led activities at Midpen preserves are returning this autumn and you are invited to get reacquainted with our passionate providers of natural and cultural history. To ease into reengagement for fall, docent naturalist-led activities will be available as monthly limited offerings on openspace.org/activities. All activities will require reservations and will adhere to COVID-19 public health mandates and changeable restrictions, as well as Midpen protocols for participant and docent safety. Ecological revelations, place-based stories and scenic discoveries are enriched when you share trail time with these volunteers and they are eager to welcome you.



Bob Coomber and former Midpen staff member Carmen Lau at Skyline Ridge Preserve. (John Green)

Ravenswood Preserve Bay Trail Project Wins Award

The new Ravenswood Bay Trail connection, which created a new trail segment between Ravenswood Open Space Preserve and University Avenue and linked over 80 miles of contiguous San Francisco Bay Trail, has been awarded the Silicon Valley Bicycle Coalition’s 2021 Bike Summit Project of the Year.

The award celebrates projects that promote biking and make biking safer. There was a strong field of nominated projects and Midpen is proud to share the award with Redwood City Slow Streets Pilot Program.

Find out more about the new trail and plan a bike ride to the preserve at openspace.org/ravenswood.



This fall, pedestrians and bicyclists can enjoy migratory birds passing through the bay wetlands from the award-winning new San Francisco Bay Trail segment in Midpen’s Ravenswood Preserve. (Mike Kahn/Midpen)

Expanding Access for All

Midpen recently completed the first two years of our Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) barrier removal plan, part of a long-term, 15-year effort to support accessible programs, activities and services. At our Ravenswood Preserve, the existing easy-access trail was resurfaced and a beautiful new 0.6-mile trail and boardwalk were carefully constructed across the sensitive salt-marsh habitat.

Additionally, we installed three new ADA-compliant restrooms alongside ADA-accessible parking stalls at our Windy Hill, Monte Bello and Russian Ridge preserves, and updated over 90 percent of our preserve entrance stiles to accommodate wheelchairs.

Work on our next set of projects will take place over the next few years and focus on regrading and resurfacing several easy-access trails: Alpine Pond Loop and Horseshoe Loop trails at Skyline Ridge Preserve, and Cordilleras Trail at Pulgas Ridge Preserve.

Learn more about our efforts to create a more inclusive open space experience at openspace.org/barrier-removal.

More than 90 percent of our preserve entrance stiles have been updated to accommodate wheelchairs.

An Extraordinary Year of Growth



Reflecting on our fiscal year that ended June 30, 2021, Midpen’s role in public safety was front and center. As the pandemic wore on, we continued to prioritize protecting staff and visitors, so our preserves could remain open as safe, outdoor spaces. We experienced record visitation, including many first-timers. We also brought nature closer to home with 80 interpretive videos and a livestream camera at the Daniels Nature Center and Alpine Pond.

As people marched in solidarity for racial and social justice, the Midpen board of directors passed a resolution reiterating our commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion, affirming that nature is essential to all people. I launched two staff committees focused on community outreach and partnerships and recruitment, hiring and staff development to seek new ideas and strategies.

In the face of climate change, decades of fire suppression, and another year of drought, Midpen is directing unprecedented staff and financial resources to preventing and preparing for increased fire risk. We developed our Wildland Fire Resiliency Program that allows us to increase our ecologically sensitive vegetation management. We remain ready to respond to fires if they do occur. When the CZU Lightning Complex fire burned on nearby lands, Midpen fire-trained staff assisted Cal Fire in holding the fire at Old Haul Road. During these same lightning storms, Midpen rangers extinguished four fires that sparked on District lands.

Despite these challenges, it was a productive year in furthering our mission of land conservation, natural resource

protection and ecologically sensitive public access. Midpen protected another 686 acres in perpetuity and expanded regional trail connections at several preserves: completing the small-but-mighty San Francisco Bay Trail connection at Ravenswood Preserve and supporting the Saratoga-to-the-Sea Trail. We removed numerous accessibility barriers to improve access for people with different physical abilities, began evaluating potential e-bike use, and explored new strategies to improve transit, bicycle and pedestrian access to popular preserves.

Staff completed field work to improve native habitats and in support of the Highway 17 project to create safe trail and wildlife crossings. We worked

We continue to prioritize protecting staff and visitors so our preserves can remain open and safe.

with researchers to study key species and inform our land management decisions: the endangered marbled murrelet in conifer forests; a migrating newt population at Sierra Azul Preserve; and two California species of special concern that depend on preserved grasslands: the burrowing owl and American badger. We also began a multiyear study of mountain lions at preserves near urban areas.

We closed the year by exploring a new partnership with Santa Clara County for enforcing a ridgeline easement that ensures Lehigh Quarry operations do not impact neighboring Rancho San Antonio County Park and Open Space Preserve.

And last, but certainly not least, we secured nearly \$10 million in grant funding to stretch our taxpayer funds in delivering projects and services for the public.

For a full recap of our fiscal year 2021 accomplishments, join us for the September 22 board of directors meeting.

MIDPENINSULA REGIONAL OPEN SPACE DISTRICT

Midpen helps plants, animals and people thrive throughout the greater Santa Cruz Mountains region by preserving a connected greenbelt of more than 65,000 acres of public open space. Midpen is a public agency created in 1972 by a grassroots voter initiative to protect the green spaces in parts of Santa Clara, San Mateo and Santa Cruz counties. We manage 26 open space preserves with nearly 250 miles of trails for you to explore, free of charge, all year long.

Our Mission: To acquire and preserve a regional greenbelt of open space land in perpetuity, protect and restore the natural environment and provide opportunities for ecologically sensitive public enjoyment and education.

Our mission on the San Mateo County Coast: To acquire and preserve in perpetuity open space land and agricultural land of regional significance, protect and restore the natural environment, preserve rural character, encourage viable agricultural use of land resources and provide opportunities for ecologically sensitive public enjoyment and education.

BOARD MEETINGS

Board meetings are held on the second and fourth Wednesdays of each month at 7 p.m. Please visit openspace.org/board-meetings for details.

Ana María Ruiz, General Manager
Leigh Ann Gessner, Open Space Views Editor
Renée Fitzsimons, Outdoor Activities Editor

Learning from Science and our Partners About Restoring Second-Growth Forests

Building on the success of forest health projects done by partners, Midpen is assessing the potential benefits of a similar restoration forestry project to improve the health of 1,210 acres of redwood forest in our La Honda Creek Open Space Preserve.

About half (30,000 acres) of the land Midpen manages in the Santa Cruz Mountains are forest and woodland habitat, nearly all of which have been significantly altered by historic clear-cut logging and dense regrowth, fire suppression and accumulation of vegetation, sudden oak death and climate change.

“We’re left with second-growth forests that are much less diverse and two to four times denser than old-growth stands,” Midpen Senior Resource Management Specialist Aaron Hébert said. “If we look at what makes a forest healthy — tree size and spacing, different kinds of trees, irregular tree tops that support wildlife like marbled murrelets, openings in the canopy, wood decaying on the forest floor and wood in the creeks — restoration forestry introduces treatments designed to get things headed in the right direction.”

Restoration forestry projects start with an assessment of current conditions, then a prescription that matches the benefits of different treatment alternatives with the goals for that particular stand of trees in terms of forest health, habitat value, fuel reduction and carbon storage. Demonstration projects often include a control area that is not treated so the work can be evaluated in 15-20 years.

While only time can create old-growth forests, science shows restoration forestry practices can accelerate the pace at which second-growth forests transform into mature, diverse forests that provide better wildlife habitat, carbon storage, and resilience to disease and fire.

“Today’s challenges mean that we need to go beyond simply preserving



Biologists walking among second-growth redwoods in La Honda Creek (Kyle Ludowitz)

land,” Midpen General Manager Ana Ruiz said. “We have to also actively manage these lands to improve habitat, to reduce fire risk and to counter climate change. Our partners have demonstrated that restoration forestry can make a difference in forest health and resilience.”

Learn more and sign-up to stay informed via email about this project at openspace.org/forest.

Highway 236

In 2012, Sempervirens Fund thinned small-diameter redwoods on a property they preserved near Highways 236 and 9 in the Santa Cruz Mountains. Despite five years of historic drought, the growth rate in the thinned areas was 72% greater than in the untreated areas. Another evaluation is planned for 2027.

San Vicente Redwoods

A collaborative comprised of the Sempervirens Fund, Save the Redwoods League, Peninsula Open Space Trust and Land Trust of Santa Cruz County performed restoration forestry at this recently preserved Santa Cruz County site to improve forest ecosystems.

Wildland Fire Resiliency

Completed Coal Creek Preserve Project Highlights Expanding Vegetation Management

This fall, vegetation management projects associated with Midpen’s new Wildland Fire Resiliency Program are beginning in earnest. We are proactively expanding our wildland fire prevention and preparation work six-fold over the next decade to assist ecosystems in becoming healthier and more resilient, reduce wildland fire risk and facilitate fire agency response.

Significant projects anticipated to begin this year include habitat enhancement for the rare Kings Mountain manzanita, a significant shaded fuel break through Thornewood Open Space Preserve and mitigating the effects of Sudden Oak Death through forest health activities at Bear Creek Redwoods Open Space Preserve.

Coal Creek Preserve Shaded Fuel Break

A recently completed 2.5-mile shaded fuel break in our Coal Creek Preserve along Skyline Boulevard with the California Conservation Corps illustrates the types of projects we implement to improve ecological health, wildland fire resilience and safety.

Before work begins on any Midpen project, biologists survey for, map and flag areas needing extra protection for sensitive plants and wildlife. At Coal Creek, this included wood rat nests and a population of rare popcorn flowers.

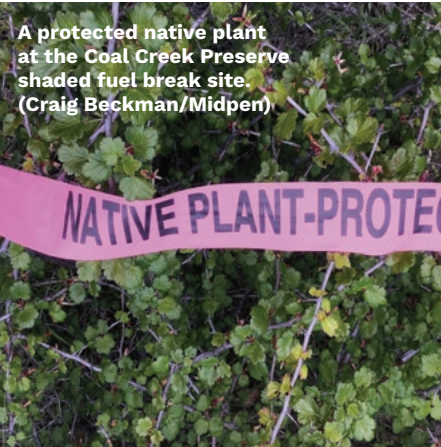
Using hand and mechanical work, and prioritizing non-native and invasive plants and trees, California Conservation Corps crews spent 14 weeks clearing dense brush from tree groves, removing low and hanging tree limbs and mowing along existing roads and trails in the preserve. The goal of the fuel break is to stop or slow potential fires, keep them on the ground and provide firefighters with a place to take a stand.

This project was a high priority in CalFire’s Community Wildfire Protection Plan and was supported by San Mateo County Supervisor Don Horsley, San Mateo Resource Conservation District,

South Skyline FireSafe Council and a Proposition 68 grant.

Building Capacity

Our Wildland Fire Resiliency Program, several years in the making, guides us in prioritizing vegetation management projects using the best available science and input from our fire agency partners across the region, assisting firefighter response and reintroducing prescribed fire to our lands potentially starting in 2023 (pending further environmental review).



A protected native plant at the Coal Creek Preserve shaded fuel break site. (Craig Beckman/Midpen)

We are proactively expanding our wildland fire prevention and preparation work six-fold over the next decade.

To date, we’ve secured nearly \$2 million in grants to support Wildland Fire Resiliency Program projects starting this fall, and continue competing for additional funds. We hired additional staff to implement and manage the growing work and strengthened capacity-building partnerships, including a \$750,000, 4-year contract with the San Jose Conservation Corps and Charter School.

Learn more and sign-up to stay informed about projects in your area at openspace.org/fire.



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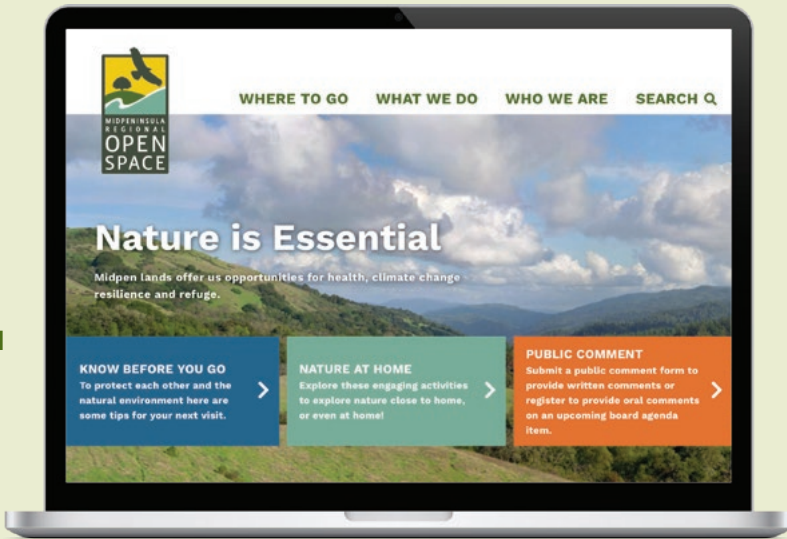
Follow us on social media:



Coming Soon!

A Fresh Look for the Openspace.org Website

We’ve been working behind the scenes to make our website even more user-friendly. Upcoming changes include a refreshed design and new ways to find information about Midpen’s work preserving a connected greenbelt of more than 65,000 acres of public open space. Dig in to find out about preserves, projects and all things Midpen! Launching soon at openspace.org.



Picture Perfect

Midpen’s 2021 Photo Contest Winners

The pandemic has underscored how essential public open space is to our community’s health and well-being. More than 200 preserve visitors shared the moments in nature that helped get them — and all of us — through these challenging times by participating in Midpen’s annual photo contest.



**ASPIRING PHOTOGRAPHERS
CATEGORY WINNER**
Getting the side eye from a California quail at Picchetti Ranch Preserve. (Lucy Wang, Mountain View High School, Grade 11)



**PEOPLE’S CHOICE WINNER
AND LANDSCAPE CATEGORY WINNER**
Lupine and poppy blends at Russian Ridge Preserve. (Shruti Jana)



PLANT LIFE CATEGORY WINNER
Fetid adder’s tongue in Purisima Creek Redwoods Preserve. (Marty Higgins)



WILDLIFE CATEGORY WINNER
Red-tailed hawk in Foothills Preserve. (Ajinkya Athavale)